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ABSTRACT

Research libraries are urged to take part in a National Preservation Program for their most important library materials. Techniques of conservation of past and current materials, including microfilming and storage at low temperatures, are discussed, while a national preservation center which would store materials is also proposed. Development of this project would include (1) surveys of research libraries in order to determine those materials that warranted preservation, (2) standards for microfilming these materials, (3) establishment of a national preservation microfilming center, (4) establishment of effective bibliographic control procedures, and (5) establishment of a procedure whereby libraries would contribute master microfilm negatives to the center. (AP)

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A NATIONAL PRESERVATION PROGRAM

- a working paper

Office of the Assistant Director for Preservation
Administrative Department, Library of Congress

IR 004 506

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT DIRECTOR FOR PRESERVATION

A NATIONAL PRESERVATION PROGRAM FOR LIBRARIES

I. INTRODUCTION

Preservation problems in libraries divide themselves into three general categories with a moderate degree of overlapping in the three areas. For all practical purposes, major preservation problems may be classified as follows:

> ...the preservation of materials published since about 1800, and now reaching advanced stages of embrittlement and deterioration.
>
> ...the preservation of older materials ranging from the earliest printed books in the library collections to approximately the beginning of the nineteenth century.
>
> ...the preservation of library materials of the future.

Within each of the above categories, there are numerous and varied formats of materials published on paper, as well as an increasingly large variety of materials published or preserved in such other forms as microfilm, motion picture film, slides, video tapes, phonograph discs, and others. Although a comprehensive National Preservation Program cannot ignore the newer forms in which knowledge is published and disseminated, the present proposal is focused largely on paper documents in their many formats.

II. THE PROBLEMS

We can elaborate on the above as follows:

A. Library materials published since about 1800, present the biggest preservation problem with which American libraries must contend. These are the materials which, for the most part, are not rare enough or intrinsically valuable enough to justify restoration in the original format, but are of sufficient value to justify preservation of the

intellectual content. In the Library of Congress alone it is estimated conservatively that some six million such volumes are so brittle they cannot be given to a user without significant risk of damage. In the New York Public Library it is estimated that more than half of the collection has reached such an advanced stage of embrittlement. While similar figures for other libraries are not available, it appears certain that the percentages of materials in research library collections are sufficiently high to pose major problems for the custodial institutions.

At the present date, there is no fully tested, feasible method for the mass treatment of such materials. Even if such a process did exist it would probably benefit no more than 65% of the brittle books in library collections, since deacidification does not restore strength to paper already embrittled. For all such brittle volumes there appear to be only two feasible preservation procedures: 1) low temperature storage, and, 2) microfilming to preserve the intellectual content.

B. Materials in library collections printed before about 1800 are, for the most part, in better condition than the more recent materials described above, although there are many exceptions, especially among materials published toward the end of this period. In most cases, the paper in books dating from the 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries is in good to excellent condition. In these instances, the problems are generally the result of wear and tear through the years, combined with vandalism, accidental damage, and insect or mold damage.

The major approach to the conservation of these older materials must be that of providing suitable preservation, repair, or restoration treatment where the value of the item justifies the cost. Because every such artifact or document presents a wide range of different problems dependent upon many factors, including the age and value of the book, the type of binding, the condition and type of paper, the nature of the ink, and the vicissitudes to which the volume or other item has been subjected during its lifetime, only a trained conservator is capable of dealing with them.

C. Materials published today, as well as those to be published in the foreseeable future are being printed on paper which is no better than the book paper of the past century. In many cases such paper is worse than that with which librarians contend today. Unless effective action is taken soon the preservation problems of the next hundred years will be more serious than those of the present.

III. A SUGGESTED NATIONAL PRESERVATION PROGRAM

A. Preserving the intellectual content of materials published since about 1800.

Of the millions of embrittled and deteriorating volumes on the shelves of the nation's libraries, only a relative few have such intrinsic value as to justify the cost of restoration. The intellectual content of the majority of such volumes is important, however.

As indicated above, two methods are available for preserving the intellectual content of these books.

1. ...storage at low temperature in warehouse-type structures or in underground caves where optimum temperature and humidity can be maintained. Without question, such storage offers the most economical and feasible method of preserving these materials for indefinite periods of time. It should be remembered, in this connection, that paper scientists generally agree that for every 10 degrees F. the storage temperature can be reduced, the life of the paper can be approximately doubled.

2. ...microfilming to preserve the intellectual content at a significantly lower cost than the cost of restoration in the original format. At the Library of Congress, for example, it costs approximately 24 dollars to microfilm the average three hundred page volume. To properly treat the same volumes and restore it in its original format costs 10 to 15 times as much.

At the same time, microfilming is more expensive than low temperature storage. There is, moreover, the question of the life expectancy of microfilm. A carefully processed silver-halide negative microfilm appears to have excellent prospects for archival permanence, but the fact remains that our experience with microfilm is limited to some fifty years or less while our experience with paper goes back nearly 2,000 years.

Ideally, then, the solution to the problem of preserving brittle and deteriorating books would be to provide low temperature storage for all such materials. From the practical point of view, however, and in terms of preserving library collections nationwide, the assemblage of the brittle materials now stored in the nation's research libraries in one

location (or in a limited number of locations) poses a major problem. In fact, the original proposal for a national program to preserve brittle and deteriorating books proved untenable, in part at least, because no library was willing to surrender its materials to a national collection.

For this reason, the Library of Congress believes that a National Preservation Program, initially at least, should emphasize microfilming the brittle materials published during the last century, with storage of the master microfilm negatives under ideal environmental conditions. However, we also propose that low temperature storage facilities be provided for books. In time, it is likely that a significant number of deteriorated materials would be assigned to a National Preservation Collection by the libraries holding such.

Although it is perhaps premature to discuss the location of a National Preservation Collection it can be noted that physical security in the event of war should be given consideration. Thus a surface structure near any major metropolitan area would have much less to recommend it than would an underground facility where stored materials would have both an ideal environmental and physical security.

A national preservation project designed to preserve by microfilming, the intellectual content of those deteriorating materials which do not warrant more expensive treatment should include the following elements:

1. ...the conduct of surveys of the major research libraries of the United States to determine those classes of materials most in need of preservation and the development of priorities for microfilming such materials.

2. ...the development of standards (both bibliographic and technical) for microfilming those materials to be included in the national program.

3. ...the establishment of a national preservation microfilming center dedicated solely to microfilming deteriorating materials, equipped with special cameras designed for filming rare materials, and staffed with personnel trained in the techniques of handling fragile materials. In addition, this center should contain specially designed vaults for the archival storage of the master negatives of national preservation microfilms.

4. ...the establishment of effective bibliographic control procedures for microfilmed materials through a national network and clearing house to: 1) receive reports of all materials microfilmed under the national conservation program and 2) to publish such information on a regular and timely basis.

5. ...the establishment of a procedure under which participating research libraries would contribute master microfilm negatives (i.e., those which meet national microfilming standards) to the center.

B. Preserving those materials in library collections which justify preservation, repair, or restoration in the original format.

1. Training Program for Conservators

Without question the single most pressing and unsolved problem in the conservation of library and archival materials is the almost total lack of personnel capable of providing the expertise needed for the conservation treatment of the hundreds of thousands of items which justify preservation in their original format. If a national preservation program did nothing other than to establish a sound training program for conservators of library materials, it would repay all the time, money, and effort involved.

The training program proposed here would utilize the academic program and degree granting facilities of a local university. Students in the conservation program would receive special courses in conservation chemistry, the history and technology of paper, administration of conservation programs, as well as at-the-bench training in the LC laboratory and workshops. Graduates holding bachelor's degrees with majors in the conservation of library and archival materials could enter the field or could go on to take a master's degree in conservation.

2. Regional centers for the conservation of library and archival materials.

Each year the Preservation Office receives hundreds of letters and phone calls asking for advice and assistance on conservation problems. Inevitably, the next question is, "where can I have this work done". Unfortunately, there are few private conservators capable of handling the wide ranging preservation problems typical of

most large library collections. One of the most effective and productive national conservation programs the Library of Congress could undertake would be the establishment of one or more regional conservation centers. In fact several university libraries have already requested L.C. to establish such centers at their institutions.

Such a center (or centers) established on a regional basis on university campuses, staffed by graduates of a cooperative training program in conservation, and supervised by the Library of Congress, could undoubtedly become self-supporting in two to four years. The returns, in terms of improving library conservation practices and conserving the nation's collections, would be enormous.

3. National workshops in conservation

It will require several years to establish a sound conservation training program and for the graduates of this program to gain the experience needed for them to staff the proposed regional centers. In the interim, the Library proposes a series of conservation workshops designed to educate librarians in the fundamental principles of conservation. Such workshops should be conducted on a regional basis.

4. Training aids

Despite a lack of professional training, librarians increasingly find themselves assigned duties related to conservation. In such cases a series of carefully planned training films or videotapes designed to present certain fundamental preservation concepts and techniques would prove invaluable. Such films would have equal or greater value for workshops and seminars conducted by the Preservation Office. (See 3 above.)

5. Emergency salvage teams

Increasingly, the conservation staff of the Library of Congress is called upon to provide its acknowledged expertise in the salvage of materials damaged by fire and water. Within hours after the Federal Records Center in St. Louis experienced a disastrous fire in 1974, L.C. had been requested to provide the assistance of its conservation staff. More recently at the request of the Geological Survey, a member of the staff of the Preservation Research Office went to Denver to assist in the salvage of the Survey's library and aerial photograph collections which were badly damaged in a weekend fire in the Federal Center. The Preservation Office advises, usually by telephone, on several such catastrophes every month. It would be a significant service to government agencies, libraries, and archives if

the Library could provide a specially trained team of one or two persons who could be available at any time to assist in such emergencies anywhere in the United States.

C. Preserving library materials of the future

1. The preservation of future publications is as essential for scholarship as is the preservation of materials previously published. Fortunately, a viable solution to this problem appears to be simpler and less costly than the preservation of materials previously published. An effective program for the preservation of future publications should encompass the following:

a. ...amendment of the Copyright Law to provide for the submission of three copies, the third copy to become part of the national preservation collection.

b. ...provision of low-temperature facilities to assure the archival storage of the materials in this collection.

c. ...establishment of a suitable record keeping facility to record the materials taken into the collections and to disseminate such information when necessary.

d. ...establishment of facilities for microfilming these materials when library copies become too deteriorated for use.

2. Improvement of book paper

In 1.a. above, it was proposed that one copy of all copyrighted materials published in the future be stored under ideal environmental conditions, thus creating a national preservation collection of materials in original format. As a corollary to that project a national program should make every effort to persuade paper-makers to produce better, stronger, long-lived paper.

C. Funding

A program of the magnitude proposed here could, in five to ten years time, make a significant and measurable impact on the preservation problems of American libraries, but such a program requires

substantial funding and wide ranging authority to attack the problem simultaneously on several fronts. If, as has been suggested, there are foundations willing to fund a sound program to preserve the national heritage in the nation's libraries, there is no better time to initiate such a program than the present.